

Scripture Study

Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle A



Opening prayer

Isaiah 45:1, 4-6

(Ps 96:1,3-5,7-10)

1 Thessalonians 1:1-5b

Matthew 22:15-21

Overview of the Gospel:

- This Sunday's Gospel finds Jesus in Jerusalem just days before his Passion. He continues to offer his opponents a chance to repent until the very end, even as they conspire on how to destroy him.
- Taking common cause with the Pharisees, another group, "the Herodians," join the conspiracy against Jesus. This group (mentioned in the Scriptures only twice in Mark, and once in Matthew) were supporters of King Herod. They were comfortable with the Roman occupation that kept Herod in power and from which they profited economically.
- The Pharisees, on the other hand, despised the Romans and Herod, and advocated passive resistance to their rule. Two more unlikely allies could hardly be imagined.
- After insincerely trying to flatter Jesus (verse 16), the Pharisees and the disciples of the Herodians attempt to trick him into making a damaging statement (verse 17). If Jesus had answered, "Pay the tax," the Pharisees would use it to discredit him before the people as a traitor to the Jews. Had he said, "Don't pay the tax," the Herodians would have turned him into the Romans as one advocating insurrection (as it turns out, even though he says the opposite, he was falsely accused of this at his trial; see Luke 23:2).

Questions:

- In the 1st Reading, we hear about Cyrus, the king of Persia and the most powerful man in the world of his time. It would be he that would issue the decree releasing the Jews from their exile in Babylon to return to their land. From where does this great king's power come?
- In the 2nd Reading, Paul reminds of their chosen state before God (verse 4)? What are the fruits that Paul sees in their lives to confirm this call (v 3, 5)? Where are the fruits in our lives?
- In the Gospel Reading, why do the Herodians (allied to Rome) and the Pharisees (admired and influential religious separatists) make strange partners? How is Jesus a threat to each?
- What would the social or political consequences have been if Jesus had simply said "Pay Caesar"? If he had said "*Don't pay Caesar*"?
- What does Jesus mean by his answer (verse 21)? What should we give to God?
- What is Jesus teaching about the relationship between Church and State? Which obligation is primary? Why?
- In your life, what belongs to Caesar? To God? How well are you giving to each? What prevents you from giving to God what is God's?

Catechism of the Catholic Church: §§ 450, 2242

Closing prayer

God certainly desires our greatest good, more than we ourselves do. Better than we He knows how it can be effected. The choice of these means is entirely in His hands, since it is He Who disposes and regulates all that happens in this world. It is therefore absolutely certain that whatever befalls us, will always be the best for us. --St. Augustine

Remember to read and meditate on the daily Mass readings found in the bulletin!

"Give to God what belongs to God"

Gospel reading: *Matt 22:15-21*

Then the Pharisees went and took counsel how to entangle him in his talk. And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are true, and teach the way of God truthfully, and care for no man; for you do not regard the position of men. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the money for the tax." And they brought him a coin. And Jesus said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" They said, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." When they heard it, they marveled; and they left him and went away.

Meditation: What do we owe God and our neighbor? Scripture tells us to give to everyone whatever is their due and to "owe no one anything, except to love one another" (Romans 13:6-8). The Jewish authorities sought to trap Jesus in a religious-state issue. The Jews resented their foreign rulers and despised paying taxes to Caesar. They posed a dilemma to test Jesus to see if he was loyal to them and to their understanding of religion. If Jesus answered that it was lawful to pay taxes to a pagan



ruler, then he would lose credibility with the Jewish nation who would regard him as a coward and a friend of Caesar. If he said it was not lawful, then the Pharisees would have grounds to report him to the Roman authorities as a political trouble-maker and have him arrested. Jesus avoided their trap by confronting them with the image of a coin. Coinage in the ancient world had significant political power. Rulers issued coins with their own image and inscription on them. In a certain sense the coin was regarded as the personal property of the ruler. Where the coin was valid the ruler held political sway over the people. Since the Jews used the Roman currency, Jesus explained that what belonged to Caesar must be given to Caesar.

This story has another deeper meaning as well. We, too, have been stamped with God's image since we are created in his own likeness – "God created man in his own image... male and female he

created them" (Genesis 1:26-27). We rightfully belong not to ourselves, but to God who created us and redeemed us in the precious blood of his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ (see 1 Corinthians 6:19-20). Paul the Apostle says that we are to present our bodies as a living sacrifice to God (Romans 12:1). Do you acknowledge that your life and everything you possess belongs to God and not to yourself? And do you give to God what rightfully belongs to Him?

"Lord, because you have made me, I owe you the whole of my love; because you have redeemed me, I owe you the whole of myself; because you have promised so much, I owe you all my being. Moreover, I owe you as much more love than myself as you are greater than I, for whom you gave yourself and to whom you promised yourself. I pray you, Lord, make me taste by love what I taste by knowledge; let me know by love what I know by understanding. I owe you more than my whole self, but I have no more, and by myself I cannot render the whole of it to you. Draw me to you, Lord, in the fullness of love. I am wholly yours by creation; make me all yours, too, in love." (Prayer of Anselm, 1033-1109 AD)

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